Eat Real Food

Marion Nestle lets no foil-wrapped treat or fluorescently alluring drink go unchallenged in her campaign to expose what she calls dodgy marketing ploys meant to sell Americans on processed foods. On her blog, www.foodpolitics.com, she tangles with corporations and government agencies that hurt fierce criticism right back at her. Author of books on the scientific, economic and social influences of food choice such as Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health and What to Eat, her day job is professor in the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health at New York University. She has a doctorate in molecular biology and a Master of Public Health in nutrition.

Marion Nestle visits Heifer Headquarters in Little Rock, Ark.

Interviewed by Donna Stokes, World Ark managing editor

Why do you think people are confused about nutrition and healthful eating?

MARION NESTLE: It has to do with research, specifically the way the press covers research, and also with marketing. Much of it is focused on single nutrients rather than food. And theminute you start talking about single nutrients and not food you’re in trouble, because unprocessed foods contain lots and lots of nutrients required in the human diet in different proportions. When you’re eating a varied diet, you don’t give it another thought.

But variety, moderation and balance are a hard sell to the public. Nobody really knows what those things mean. And there’s so much marketing around specific nutrients that people are eating the most ridiculous products, thinking they’re good for them. PoserBar is a good example of that. I think they’re a ridiculous product because they don’t taste very good.

Why would you want to eat something like that when you could eat real food?

EXPLAIN why you’re fed up with food companies’ health claims displayed on food packaging.

In a funny sort of way this kind of marketing isn’t supposed to appeal to your higher cognitive functions. You’re not supposed to really notice them. Take for example the “immunity” banner on Cocoa Krispies cereal. I was just floored by that; how do they get away with saying that? By allowing some of these claims, the [Food and Drug Administration] isn’t doing its job very well.

If you’re a customer coming into the store, you’re supposed to think “this cereal has antioxidants in it, so if I buy this cereal it’s good for my kid.” So I can buy this junky, sugary, low-fiber cereal for my kid, and it’ll be fine because it got all of these good things in it. But what you’re not thinking is that your kid is unlikely to be short of those things anyway, if you’re feeding her a vegetable now and then. I think it has to do with the way we’re hard-wired, because everybody falls for those messages. It’s very hard to shift into critical mode when you’re in a hurry and you just want to get food and go home.

So what should change?

I think people should be eating real food and as little processed food as possible. We have a big obesity problem, with many of the (excess) calories in people’s diets coming from junk foods. So I want to shift people away from the middle aisles of the grocery store and into the peripheral aisles. And also do something about portion sizes. If it is served to you, you don’t always stop to think, “Oh my heaven, that’s enormous, if I eat that much I’m going to be taking in three times as many calories than if I only ate a third of it.” You don’t go through that. You just eat it and it tastes good. Somehow there’s room for it.

I’m one big believer in regulation in the food area. Companies, left to their own, will sell more food. That’s their job. They don’t care how they do it. So I think we need some checks and balances. If it were up to me we wouldn’t have health claims on food products at all.

Can you have a business-friendly economy and a focus on good nutrition?

This is how capitalism works—the strong win and the weak lose. I’m not against business, and I’m not even against the right to make junk foods. I think companies have a right to make junk foods; people have the right to eat junk foods. I’d just like to see the proportions shift. Junk foods are not everyday foods. People should not be eating at McDonald’s every day. When my kids were little they went to McDonald’s on their birthdays; it was a really big deal. And I wouldn’t have another thought about that. But every day? That’s not a good idea. There are plenty of people who eat these foods every day and think that’s normal, that that’s what you’re supposed to eat because they’re heavily advertised.

Explain what you mean when you say hunger should be addressed as a social, not technological, problem.

When you’re hungry in developing countries, it has to do with the fact that people are poor. The people are disenfranchised—their governments are inadequate to maintain stability, they’re at war, they’ve had natural disasters. The hunger results from the fact that people don’t have access to education, housing, transportation or political stability, and I don’t think it’s any more complicated than that. Learn how to deal with food marketing. Understand that this is about democracy: Of the people, by the people, for the people. Is that too idealistic? I don’t know. I think it works.

To read more, visit Nestle’s blog at www.foodpolitics.com.